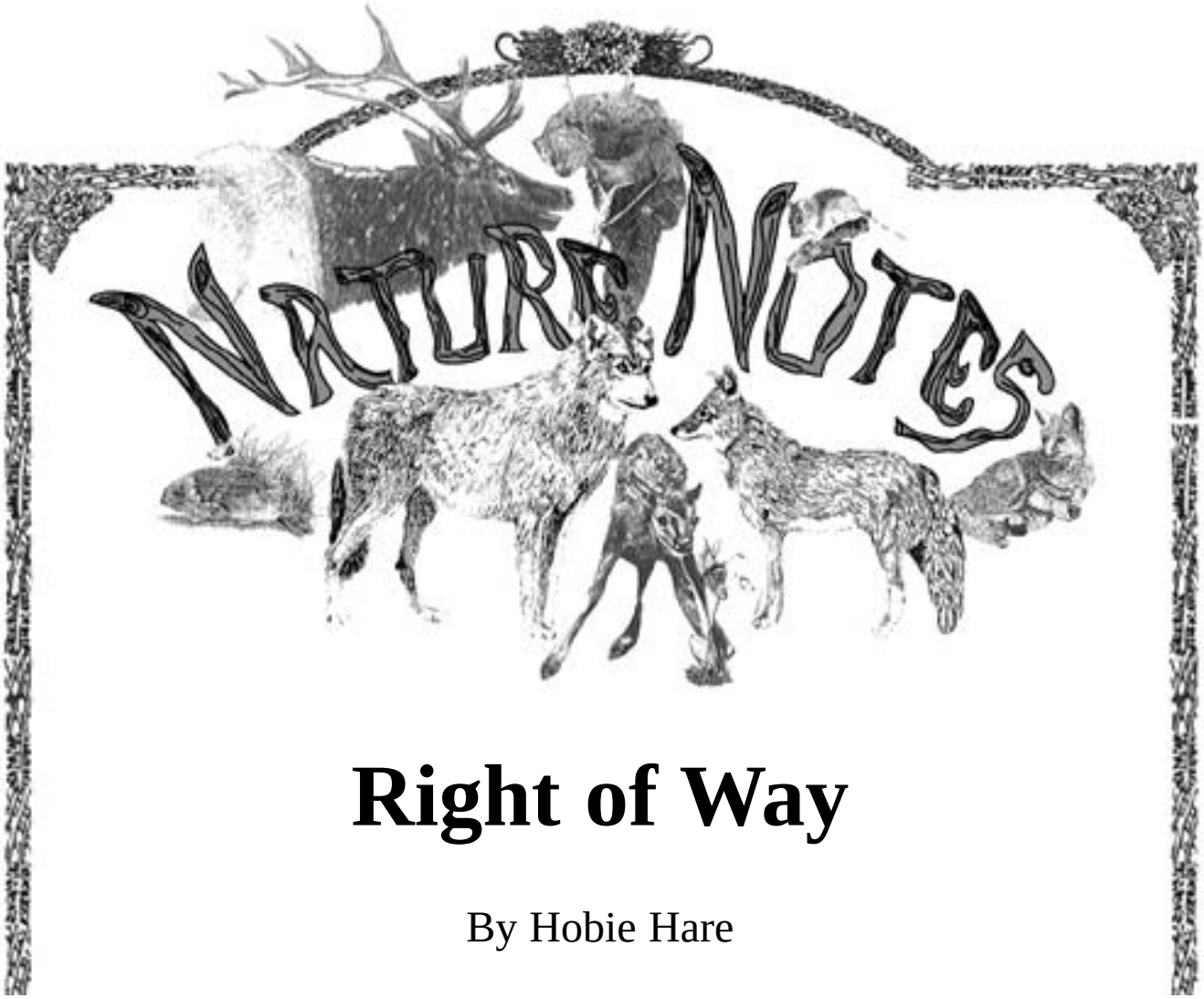

Right of Way

By Hobie Hare

Editor's Note: Occasionally a story comes across my desk that takes me back to a former life, working as a naturalist, spotting otters, and tending the fires at the West Thumb warming hut. For anyone who has visited or spent a winter in the interior of Yellowstone, this Nature Note will ring familiar. For those readers who have never been there, the following will give you a sense of Yellowstone in winter and the experience of sitting low and exposed on a snowmobile, while looking up into the eyes of the park's largest mammal. Here are one person's reflections on an encounter with a bison during his first winter in the interior of the park.

Heading home by snowmobile a few days before winter's longest night, I encounter a lone bull bison standing on the groomed road just south of Hayden Valley in the Mud Volcano area, resting. He initially gives no sign of noticing me, or of being bothered by my presence. At the same time, he is probably hoping that I will just go away, in the direction from which I came, and leave him in peace. I wait, with my engine still running.

Now wary, the bull moves slowly and deliberately away from me. Yet he stays on the road—his other options are either to move off into three feet of snow to his left, or to go down a steep bank leading to an ice-covered expanse of the Yellowstone River on his right. With the comfort and mobility it offers, this narrow strip of groomed road has become a lifeline, a survival and dispersal corridor that we have both come to expect and depend on in winter.

Standstill. And we do, two lone figures facing off on this empty stretch of road. I remember the importance to wintering wildlife of slowing way down and conserving energy, which is not so easily replenished at this time of year. The bull shakes his massive head, moves a few unsteady steps,

NPS photo.

and continues to stand in the road, staring at me with his large dark brown eyes, perhaps assessing my next move.

I get the message. I stop, and turn off my snowmobile. I am awed by the silence and the serenity of this moment. I hear and then feel the late afternoon wind shift its direction and velocity, and quickly put a face mask on top of my balaclava to ward off the chill. The wind and cold does not seem to bother the bison, standing silently, with his thick coat of fur protecting him from the freezing wind. I hear the rapid, powerful flapping of a raven's wings long before I see it glide slowly above us, and then disappear from this winter scene.

The bull bison and I continue to watch each other for a long while on this gray and cloudy December afternoon, neither of us acting or reacting. For several minutes I find myself breathing in the sharp, cold air, deeply and slowly, exhaling in unison with the bison.

The bull turns and faces the bank sloping sharply down toward the Yellowstone River. He exhales deeply, as if finally deciding to move on. He swings his head a final time in my direction. Mistakenly, I take this to mean that I can pass to the right while he remains safely on the other side of the road.

Instead, in a burst of energy he jumps from the road, bulldozing his way through the deep drifted snow to where the riverbank begins to drop off. I gaze down to where he looks like he is heading, to the river, where the ice does not look particularly thick and the route looks arduous.

As he deliberately descends the bank, I make my own move. I start my sled and ride about 50 yards past the point where he has left the road, and then stop again, cutting the engine. I glance back to see him looking back at me, then toward the ice-covered river. He steps onto it with his full body weight. I shudder, holding my breath, expecting to hear the ice give way and the bison crash through.

The ice holds. The bull ambles to safety on the opposite bank. Then he begins to move at a more rapid gait to join a small herd of bison grazing in the snow about a half mile away.

This final vision remains in my mind as I also move at a faster pace to rejoin my own winter community on the northern shore of Yellowstone Lake. Snow begins to fall and swirl as I head homeward. It gradually picks up in intensity, slowly burying the landscape with a new, sparkling white layer.

That night I watch as the snow continues to fall outside my window, and ponder how this thickening of Yellowstone's deepening winter blanket will be perceived by both visitors and residents alike. It will be greeted warmly by the many park visitors, winter enthusiasts here to celebrate the holidays in and around Yellowstone. I am less sure how the park's bison and other wintering wildlife will perceive it, for this season presents great challenges to the animals that visit or call greater Yellowstone home. I drift off into a deep December sleep, dreaming that in the future we will all be able to find peace, space, and room to roam in this increasingly crowded place.

Photo courtesy Hobie Hare.

Hobie Hare just finished his first winter season working in the interior of Yellowstone as an interpretive ranger in the Lake-Fishing Bridge area. He has also been a summer interpreter for two seasons in Yellowstone's West District, and in the spring and fall works as an environmental education ranger with the Expedition: Yellowstone! *program.*

Hobie initially came out West nearly 10 summers ago to teach international teenagers English in an outdoor setting in Montana. He taught English as a Second Language at Montana State University for five years before embarking on a more conservation-minded educational career path in the fall of 1999. Hobie has also lived and worked in Costa Rica, Venezuela, Japan, Thailand, and Australia, but now calls greater Yellowstone home.